

## **We need to focus on learning: Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report**

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Australia's post-secondary education systems are facing concurrent existential threats:

- The threat to trustworthy credentials caused by various forms of cheating and exploitation of these sectors by bad actors;
- The threat to assessment and academic integrity (and therefore to learning) posed by generative AI.

While these threats are alluded to in the Interim Report, we feel that they are not sufficiently recognised as the key drivers for change that they are now and will increasingly be over the coming years.

There are significant risks associated with not providing an adequate policy foundation for dealing with these threats. These include not only the threat to the core purpose of tertiary institutions but also to the trustworthiness of the graduates of these institutions.

Large-scale, coordinated changes to practice are required and these changes need to be adequately enabled. The proposed National Learning and Teaching Committee and suggested ARC Centre of Excellence-like grants are welcome because they will go some way to addressing these issues. These suggestions should be seen as a minimum requirement. Beyond these foundations though, we have some concerns about the priorities of the Accord and of Australian policy in post-secondary education more broadly.

Our concerns stem from us (education practitioners, educational leaders, and regulators) having lost our focus on the core purpose of education: student learning. We are worried that we have all been distracted by the operational aspects of facilitating learning, particularly managing teaching, assessment, feedback, and grading. Meanwhile, research in psychology, education and neuroscience has uncovered more about how humans learn effectively in the last two decades than through the entirety of human history prior. Little of this is evident in the Interim Report or in discussions about the future of tertiary education more broadly. This is despite the increased prioritisation of this emerging evidence in K-12 education, for example, through the work of the Australian Educational Research Organisation (AERO).

A recent [editorial of Australasian Journal of Educational Technology](#) described the disconnect between evidence of how learning works and the discussions about the future directions of Australian tertiary education. Unfounded ideas about student learning persist despite evidence to the contrary.

For example, consulting firms are fond of building an argument for change on the claim that young people are 'digital natives'. The notion of digital natives oversimplifies the relationships between young people and technologies.

Furthermore, Microsoft founder and philanthropist, [Bill Gates recently heralded the beginning of the 'Age of AI'](#) by extolling the virtues of this new technology for catering to individual 'learning styles'. The idea that education should be designed for modality-based preferences has been debunked for over a decade. Progress in Australian post-secondary education toward addressing the existential threats we outline here is being impeded by these unfounded ideas about how learning actually occurs. This is not the foundation we need for the future.

TEQSA have done an outstanding job in providing support and guidance to the sector in the area of academic (and particularly educational) integrity. This has been welcome in a time when there has been widespread, cheap and easy availability of commercial contract cheating, alongside the contextual shock of a sudden shift to fully online modes of study and assessment caused by a pandemic. TEQSA is also providing much-needed support for the latest contextual shock which has resulted from the widespread awareness of easily accessible generative AI tools. It has done this by supporting the sector through advice, training and guidance, while also protecting the sector by enacting the legislative instrument made available through the federal parliament. Importantly, this work has often been conducted through partnerships between TEQSA and academic experts across Australia (see for example the CRADLE and TEQSA webinar series on generative AI and higher education).

There is only so much TEQSA can do as a regulator. More needs to be done to put the emphasis where it should be in education: on high-quality learning. We implore the Accord Panel and team to refocus on learning. Our future depends on us knowing what learning is required for the age of AI and what high-quality learning looks like so that we can know it when we see it in order to warrant it. This requires us to be better able to find evidence of when learning has occurred and, of course, when learning has *not* occurred. A significant part of this is being able to find evidence of when cheating has occurred, including via the inappropriate use of technology.

The existential threats that Australian post-secondary education faces have different manifestations but all come back to a general neglect of the core foundation of education: the development of knowing, thinking, being and acting in the world over time, i.e. learning.

Our ultimate goals for Australian higher education policy should be to create the appropriate conditions:

- To understand and measure genuine student learning
- To empty the value of cheating from our courses through a renewed focus on learning

The question that we consider the most important is:

What policy settings need to change such that educational institutions can better enable and infer actual learning (not proxies of it)?

To answer these questions, the world's leading researchers and scholars need to be entrusted as partners to help guide the future directions of Australian tertiary education. It so happens that a significant proportion of the world's leading researchers and scholars in learning, academic integrity, educational technology, and higher education are based in Australia. We stand waiting and ready to partner with policymakers and leaders to ensure that Australian tertiary education continues to be held in high esteem through this period of change. The approach to partnership taken by TEQSA could be seen as a model for how these kinds of partnerships could work across tertiary education more broadly.

### **Recommendations to the Universities Accord Panel**

1. We **endorse the establishment of a National Teaching and Learning Committee** (or similar) to enable evidence-informed sector-wide changes required to address the existential threats currently facing post-secondary education.
2. **We support the idea of providing ARC Centre of Excellence–type funding** to carry out important work of relevance to post-secondary education. For example, such funding could be used to address the issues associated with the emergence of generative AI instead of there being duplication of effort across sectors. Funding in this area is needed as the implications of AI for student learning remain unclear.
3. We recommend that the Accord Panel **put actual student learning front of mind** in determining what is ultimately recommended to the Minister in the Final Report. Applying principles of human learning to national policy will not be easy or straightforward. Learning is complex, as are Australia's educational systems. However, we have the necessary expertise in Australia. It is difficult to imagine any wholesale change to health policy without what is known about wellness and disease being front and centre in all considerations. There is mention of 'excellence in learning' in the Interim Report but everything in these sections is about pedagogy and curriculum. There is insufficient emphasis in the report on the actual developmental process that students go through. This omission exposes some concerning assumptions about what quality learning is, whether these assumptions have been tested, and how an understanding of student learning is informing (or not) the direction of Australian post-secondary education.

As internationally recognised experts, we stand ready to assist the Accord Panel and team with incorporating what is known about the processes of learning into the considerations for the Final Report. We cannot overstate the potential impact that a focus on these processes (or lack thereof) will have on the threat of cheating, adapting to the age of AI, and on quality into the future.